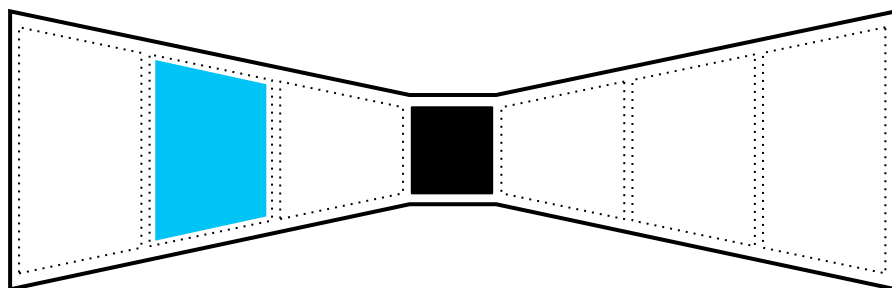**W**inning
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RESEARCH BRIEF

FACTS AND FEATURES: THE RISE OF AI SDRs

By Dominique Levin, CEO Emeritus of Winning by Design

Facts and Features: The Rise of AI SDRs

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Research conducted Q4 2024

Research Abstract

This document provides an overview of the rise of AI SDRs, specifically inbound SDRs.

It starts with a CEO Take: if you are a CEO of a B2B company, what should you know about AI SDRs? Then it will do the same for the **GTM practitioners** tasked with researching and implementing AI SDR technology. The report that follows is focused on practical considerations for implementing AI SDRs into your Go-To-Market (GTM) strategy. As the technology is still rapidly evolving, it is essential to understand the nuances, capabilities, and limitations of AI-driven solutions. The full report includes a **vendor comparison** of current relevant features as well as a **Request for Proposal (RFP) template**, both of which are available to Advisory Access subscribers.

CEO Take

AI Agent technology is quickly maturing to the point that **every B2B company must have a pilot running**. Early data indicates that AI SDRs outperform and replace humans when it comes to the inbound lead qualification use case (24x7 availability, instant and reliable response, etc.) and that AI SDRs can significantly increase the productivity of human outbound SDRs, especially when it comes to performing and integrating research. Using AI SDR technology will create more pipeline at a much lower cost, and if you ignore the technology competitors may quickly overtake you.

Most companies find that for an inbound AI SDR project, marketing is the most suitable to run the pilot as the technology must be integrated into the website. However, to ensure success, marketing must collaborate with sales and GTM operations and strategy, so set up a cross-functional task team to ensure the success of your project.

Practitioners Take

AI agents are rapidly improving and can be used for specific use cases to drive growth and overcome GTM bottlenecks, especially in areas where humans have limited skills. It is critical to see beyond the 'demo effect', a situation where the AI performs exceptionally well in a controlled environment but struggles in real-world scenarios, and understand that AI is a rapidly evolving landscape in which most vendors blur the lines between vision and features.

Here are five questions you should be asking:

1. What GTM metric is lagging?

2. What do you wish humans could be better at?

3. What features matter most?

4. How to train and test your AI SDR?

5. Which vendors should I consider?

Question 1: What GTM metric is lagging?

Consider what GTM metric you most want to improve, where you are lagging versus the industry, or your historical average in any particular metric: a conversion rate, sales cycle time, or average deal size in a particular segment. Can you envision an experiment that goes beyond the capabilities of humans to enhance this metric, such as by conducting more research, memorizing more use cases or features, and responding more quickly? AI has the potential to significantly improve these metrics, offering a promising outlook for your business.

Use AI to improve a 'sticky' GTM metric.

Perform a full Bowtie Go-To-Market Diagnostic to identify your biggest bottlenecks to growth and pick one of those areas. For example, convert more inbound requests into meetings, convert more webinar attendees into discovery calls, or turn more discovery calls into proposals.
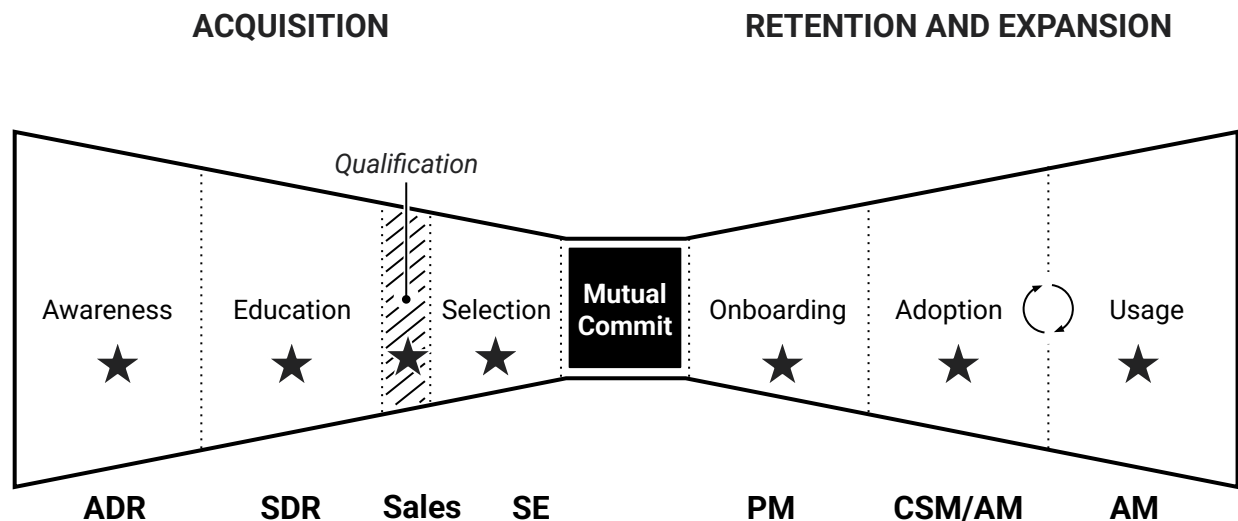
ACQUISITION   **RETENTION AND EXPANSION**

Figure 1. *The application of AI can be used in various parts of the customer journey.*

Question 2: What do you wish humans could be better at?

Find skills that could move a sticky GTM metric but are hard for humans. This way, you can accelerate growth and reduce costs with your AI implementation. Superhuman skills highlighted:

- **Infinite availability and capacity,** including the ability to respond to every inbound within seconds, follow-up with every single event attendee before/during/after the event, at any time of the day or week

- **Boundless product and company knowledge,** knowledge about every single product feature, the ability to instantly pull up relevant slides, illustrations, or parts of a demo—even during the first conversation—without deferring to a 'sales engineer' or 'product specialist' (no prospect wants more calls)

- **Know all other customer deployments and the problems they solved.** While humans have a limited library of case studies at their fingertips, an AI can instantly access all prior customer interactions and call recordings in your CRM and turn this data into relevant customer story snippets on the fly.

- **Instant ability to perform deep research** on every single inbound or outbound prospect or customer from an infinite number of first and third-party data sources to make the conversation more relevant

- **Remember everything said before**; the customers never have to repeat themselves to continue the conversation.

- **Ability to distinguish between an infinite number of personas.** Maybe the segments that your solution targets include Financial Services and Healthcare, within each vertical: mid-market companies and enterprises, and for each company: C-level, Director, and End User. It creates 2 x 3 x 3 = 18 personas, each with their pain points. For human sellers, we would dumb this down to a few personas, but an AI agent can master different starter questions and vocabulary for each of the 18 permutations.

Here are some examples of metrics and how 'superhuman' AI skills could improve each:

Metric to improve	Superhuman skills AI can use
Convert more inbound requests into meetings.	Superhumans respond to every inbound request within seconds and perform extensive research before doing so, making each response more relevant. Also, they never forget to follow up with thoughtful nudges if a meeting doesn't initially get scheduled.
Convert more webinar attendees into discovery calls.	When you invite people to an event or follow up with an email after the event, offer a live conversation with the AI then and there to learn more about the prospect and answer their questions.
Convert more discovery calls into proposals.	Because AI can have infinite product knowledge, even during the first conversation, it can answer (more) product questions and use-case questions (e.g., customer stories), leading to more prospect conversions.

Table 1. *Examples of GTM metrics to improve and how AI could help.*

Question 3: What features matter most?

How well your AI Agent will perform will depend on whether it can communicate synchronously and asynchronously, how well it can understand your customers (not just your product), and whether it can achieve goals beyond simply answering questions. Additional hygiene features will have to do with what could possibly go wrong (See next section):

Synchronicity of the conversation.

Can the AI agent handle synchronous (text/voice/video chat) and asynchronous conversations? Needless to say, synchronous capabilities are more complicated than asynchronous ones. Many use cases will require or benefit from both (See Figure 2.)

Nurture Unresponsive Inbound

Sync Chat or Call		Async Email or Message

Offer (Warm) Outbound Real Time/Live Chat
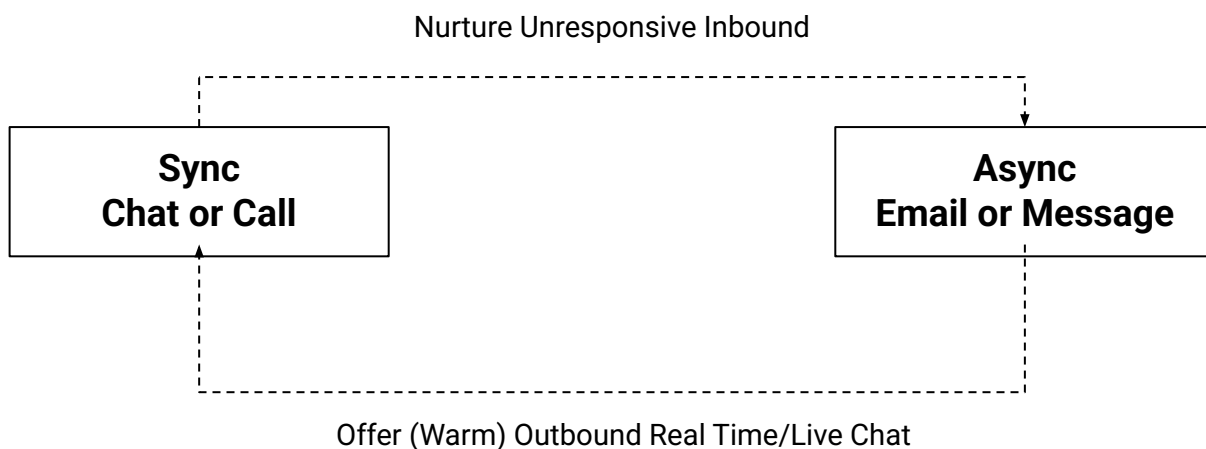
Figure 2. *Synchronous and asynchronous capabilities work together in most use cases.*

First and third-party signals

How well can the AI agent research and understand your customers, not just your products? Does the agent integrate with your CRM (first-party data) out of the box? If so, what fields can it read, and which fields does it use in customer conversations?

"Most vendors highlight CRM integration, but few incorporate the insights into the conversation."

Third-party signals can provide additional business context. Think about the ability to detect news, hires, technographic, third-party reviews, and all the other signals that may influence what thoughtful question you might open a conversation with. Most solutions do not yet perform deep research or tailor the conversation based on research.
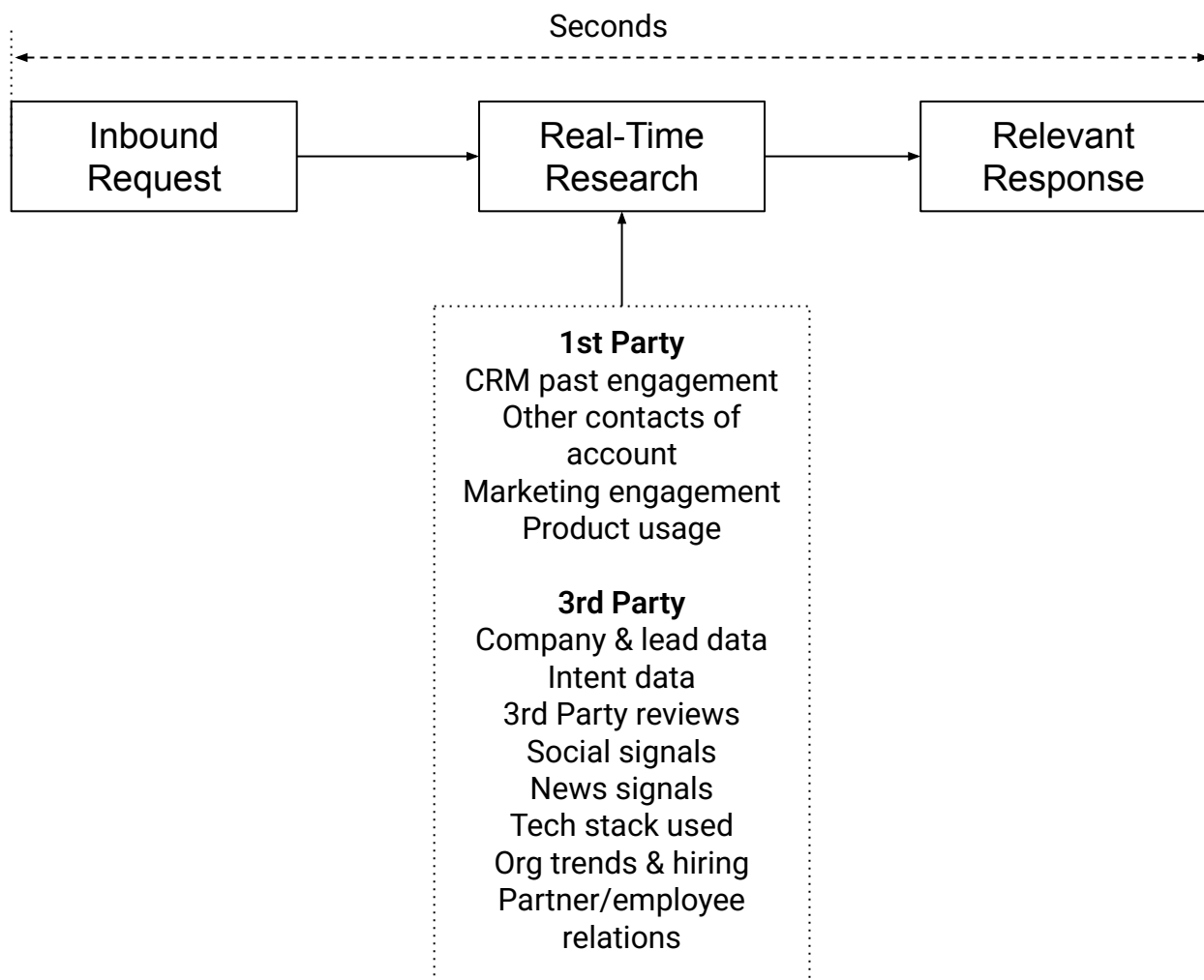
Seconds

```
┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│   Inbound    │ ───▶ │  Real-Time   │ ───▶ │   Relevant   │
│   Request    │      │   Research   │      │   Response   │
└──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
                            ▲
                            │
                   ┌─────────────────────┐
                   │      1st Party       │
                   │  CRM past engagement │
                   │   Other contacts of  │
                   │       account        │
                   │ Marketing engagement │
                   │     Product usage    │
                   │                      │
                   │      3rd Party       │
                   │ Company & lead data  │
                   │      Intent data     │
                   │   3rd Party reviews  │
                   │    Social signals    │
                   │     News signals     │
                   │    Tech stack used   │
                   │  Org trends & hiring │
                   │   Partner/employee   │
                   │       relations      │
                   └─────────────────────┘
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Figure 3. *Researching a prospect in real-time and being more relevant increases the customer experience.*

Goals of the AI interaction

Is the agent deterministic, not just generative? What goals can the AI achieve?

Can the AI achieve goals beyond simply answering questions—such as booking meetings, inviting to events, diagnosing pain and impact, recommending to the buyer how to get internal alignment for a decision, and providing proposals and pricing? Most vendors are still very focused on handing off to a human as quickly as possible. That's not much better than form automation.

Question 4: How to train and test your AI SDR?

You will need to teach your AI just like a human, but much more precisely. Therefore, standing up an AI SDR requires a significant product marketing effort. You will need to teach your AI not only about your company and product but also (and especially) about your Ideal Customer Profile, personas, and pain points (by persona).

Training your AI solutions

Some vendors turn away clients who aren't extremely clear about their ICP and personas, which shows how important this step is to success.

1. **Train AI on your company and product.**

   Most AI vendors allow you to point the AI to your website, internal knowledge base, and content repositories to accomplish this step, and this information is often readily available. You need to ensure that your website's information is up-to-date and accurate.
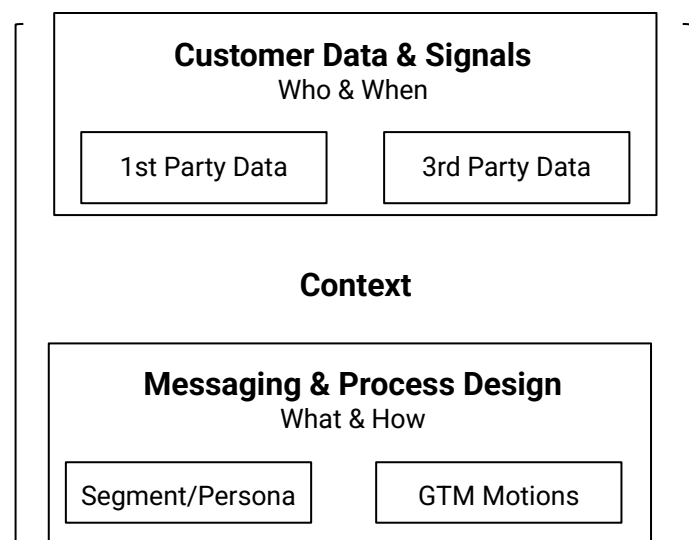
Figure 4. *Providing your AI brain with the business context to succeed is critical.*

2.   Documenting your Ideal Customer Personas

For each of the permutations of your Ideal Customer Persona, lay out the likely situation, pain, impact, and critical events by persona and provide starter questions for the AI. It is a significant product marketing upfront investment, but it will improve the results of your AI project. It is similar to the persona cards and discovery questions many enablement teams provide for their sellers.

3.   Providing a blueprint for the conversation

Humans expect to receive value from each vendor interaction, but the AI conversation should avoid feeling like an interrogation. To train the AI, provide it with blueprints or visual guides that represent the flow of a strong human interaction, just as we would do with newly minted SDRs or AEs.
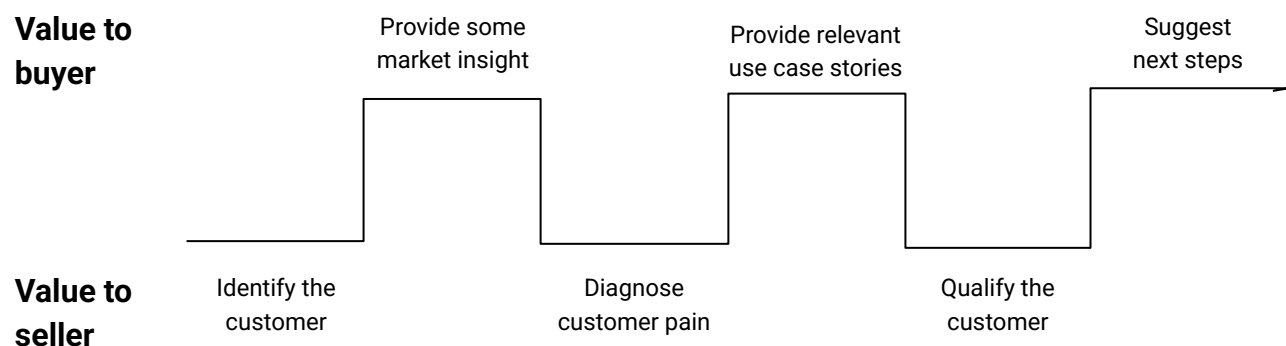

Figure 5. Provide your AI with a picture or blueprint of a good conversation.

4.   Establishing your GTM motion by persona

The next best action will depend on the customer segment and the information collected during the interaction between the customer and AI. You may operate in different customer segments and have defined a different GTM motion based on the customer's size and other factors, such as the prospect's intent (high- versus low-intent customers).

Testing your AI Agent

Building a vertical AI agent that's 80% customer-ready is relatively easy. Training and testing an AI agent to be 100% customer-ready is hard. Prematurely launching an AI agent can risk damaging customer trust or your business reputation, and result in backlash from customers facing hallucinations and toxicity. It is best practice to keep the Human In The Loop (HITL) during the first 1-3 months. Testing and monitoring HITL can take different forms:

1. **Run the solution in co-pilot mode** before switching to auto-pilot; not all vendors offer this.

2. **Keep a Human In The Loop** by having an AI and human participate together on the same call or chat, comparable to four-legged sales calls during a new rep's training period. Very few vendors offer this.

3. **Ongoing quality assurance:** Ideally, dashboards and alerts should be available to point you to suspect conversations, since it's unrealistic to manually review every AI interaction.

4. **Use red teaming to test your AI:** Red teaming involves trying to 'break' the AI and get it to give toxic or wrong answers. It is used extensively in cybersecurity and is slowly emerging to test AI agents for effectiveness, accuracy, fairness/bias, and security.

Human-in-the-loop Explained

HITL emphasizes the integration of human oversight in AI-driven processes, particularly when the potential consequences of failure are high. While AI can operate autonomously in low-risk scenarios, human judgment is crucial for tasks with significant stakes. The HITL Curve (see Figure 6) balances AI's precision with human intervention, ensuring that higher-risk, more complex tasks receive the necessary oversight while low-complexity tasks can be handled autonomously.

1:1 (Complex)
Full oversight, one human oversees one AI process.

Design Bridges

Architect •

The Human-In-The-Loop curve

SE •

Human-oversight-ratio
(Skill Level)

Build Roads

AE •
AM •
CSM •

Fix potholes

Enablement •

1:100 (Simple)
Minimal oversight, many AIs managed by one human.

SDR •

Negligible
($2/hr)

Catastrophic
($200/hour)

Consequence of Failure
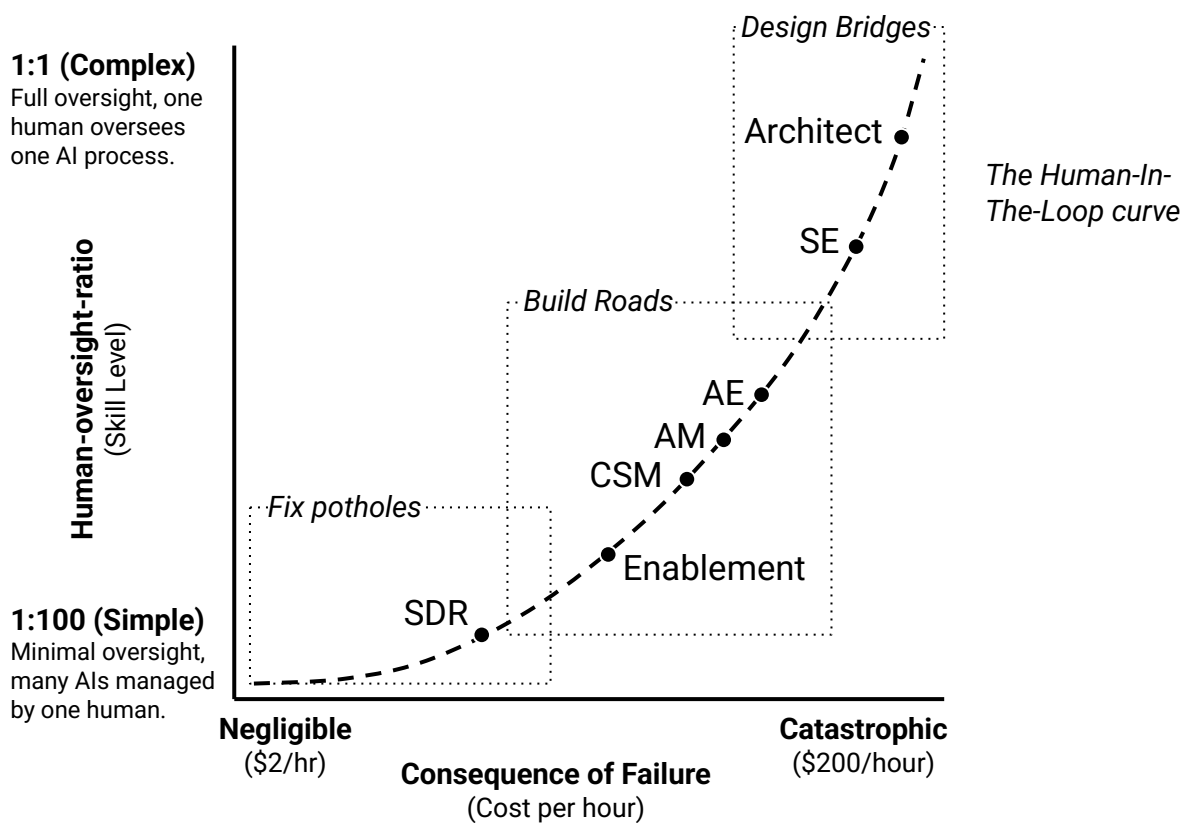(Cost per hour)

Figure 6. The Human-in-the-Loop Curve shows the relationship between AI's capability to manage low-complexity tasks with minimal oversight (1:100) and the need for full human oversight (1:1) in high-risk, complex tasks.

Question 5: What vendors should I consider?

As companies continue to explore AI's potential in sales and customer engagement, several vendors have emerged with innovative solutions to address key use cases. We've gathered insights from diverse companies at the forefront of AI-powered sales agents, each offering unique capabilities in both inbound and outbound communication. Below, we highlight the vendors we spoke to, what sets them apart, and the strengths of their offerings, from asynchronous and synchronous agents to advanced personalization and multi-channel support.

- *1Mind.com*, started by the founder/CEO of 6Sense, offers agents capable of sync and async communication. They have a live demo on their website. *What we like*: AI can participate in live video calls and remember what was said in previous conversations.

- *11x.ai* focuses on agents for both outbound and inbound sales. It is funded by Benchmark and a12z. Sign up for a live demo on the website. *What we like*: It has both asynchronous and synchronous capabilities, albeit not yet integrated.

- *AISDR.com* - focus on outbound prospecting agents via email and LinkedIn, Y Combinator startup, sign-up for a live demo on the website. *What we like*: We can work with multiple CTAs within one campaign and have multiple campaigns in parallel.

- *Algomo.com* focuses on the inbound/web-chat agent use case, starting with real-time website personalization. *What we like*: You can (self-service) launch a live demo as if the agent is already live on your website.

- *Qualified.com* focuses on inbound chatbots, and $163m was raised from Salesforce.com, Redpoint, Norwest, Tiger, and Sapphire. You can try the demo live on their website. *What we like*: extensive experience (market leader) in the inbound chat space.

- *Relevance.ai* is an agent builder platform funded by Insight Partners. Its outbound agent is free and available on its website. *What we like*: Super flexible no-code platform, its following of developers building agents, and impressive reasoning and research capabilities demo.

- *Rep.ai* focuses on inbound chat agents, evolved from ServiceBell chatbots, and has a live demo on its website. *What we like:* It is one of the few companies with a live video avatar on its website.

- **Reply.io** evolved from a sales engagement platform to an AI SDR that can combine inbound and outbound communication and automate email, LinkedIn, and SMS. *What we like:* it has many different channels for AI agents to communicate.

- **SalesAPE.ai** focuses on inbound via email, WhatsApp, SMS, or web chat. A live email demo is available on their website. *What we like:* their focus on the inbound use case.

- **Salesforce.com** focuses on outbound SDR agents and sales coach agents. General availability has been pushed back to December 4, 2024. *What we like*: In addition to SDR agents, they also have a cool sales coaching agent for humans.

- **Salesforge.ai** *focuses* on outbound prospecting co-pilot or autopilot, a 50-person startup out of Estonia, no pilot available, minimum commitment is 3 months.

- **SalesLoft/Drift***: A leading sales engagement platform with cool rhythm/prioritization algorithms, bought a leading web chatbot. *What we like:* AI features are nascent, but the promise lies in the integration with Salesloft and Drift.

- **Salespeak.ai** focuses on inbound agents who can do more than qualify leads. Their website offers a live demo. *What we like:* Salespeak.ai is focused on re-inventing and improving the entire buyer journey with AI.

- **Regie.ai** focuses on outbound sequence writing agents, Khosla Ventures, Scale Venture Partners, Foundation Capital, and South Park Commons. *What we like: A* free version available to start

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Vendor Capabilities and Market Research Guidelines

1. The list of vendors and each vendor's capabilities are evolving rapidly, making it essential to conduct thorough research.
2. The market is still in its early stages, so this note is not intended to be written in a way to favor any particular vendor.
3. A vendor must have provided a comprehensive demo of their capabilities to be included in this review. We did not engage with customers or assess production environments.

Want to make this happen?

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The following supplementary materials are available in the full version of this report, available to subscribers in the reference library. For more information on subscribing, see winningbydesign.com/access-pass.

01 **Vendor Comparison**

02 **RFP Template**

03 **Your Guide to Running Impact Sprints**

04 **SPICED Across the Customer Journey**

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